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The 'Real Issue'

Are Americans more interested in all the "dirty tricks" of Central Intelligence Agency's past operations or in that agency's ability to observe potential enemies and help to prevent the downfall of the U.S.? If so, they had better make that interest known, for current investigations of the CIA may have a real bearing on our future security.

Lt. Gen. Vernon Walters, the CIA's deputy director, had some strong words of defense for the agency and warnings for the country in his speech this week at the Veterans of Foreign Wars annual convention. Particularly did he seek to pinpoint the "real issue" in the spy operations.

He said what Americans should be concerned about today is not truth or falsehood of allegations about the CIA activities, most of which he discounted as "rummaging through the garbage pails of history." The general said, "The real issue is this. Is the United States as a free and democratic nation going to have eyes to see and ears to hear? Or are we going to stumble into the future, blind and deaf, until the day we have to choose between abject humiliation and nuclear blackmail."

Of course, he and many others fear the latter prospect if, as Gen. Walters says, the CIA is "tied hand and foot and our pockets are turned inside out and contents exposed for every foreigner to look at." The general insists that "we cannot operate with all of our secrets being turned out for public view."

Patriots defending both the CIA and its domestic counterpart, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, agree that the agencies should operate within the legal structure of their charters, particularly where it concerns respect for privacy of American citizens. At the same time, the agencies' friends do not wish to see these secret operations compelled to become so public that they are ineffective.

They join Gen. Walters in his concern about criticism in the 1990s more than they worry about what the CIA doesn't do during the 1970s. The implications of danger to this nation's continued existence are clear in his words:

"What I'm concerned about is if our successors will be asked, 'You mean you failed to do this?' 'You mean you didn't do that?' 'You mean you weren't watching for this?'"